

The Way



ay INever Was





previous page: History as Photo Op: the Queen Mother at Colonial Williamsburg. *Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg.*

left: History as Stage Set: Duke of Gloucester Street, Colonial Williamsburg. *Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg.*

I do not know just when we lost our sense of reality or interest in it, but at some point it was decided that reality was not the only option; that it was possible, permissible, and even desirable to improve on it; that one could substitute a more agreeable product. It followed that reality was, first, mutable and then expendable; its substance was abdicated for what could be revised and manipulated. Downgrading the evidence of the built world—its cities and its structures—has profoundly affected architecture and urbanism. One would think that these hard physical facts would present a reality so absolute, so irrefutable, that it would be difficult to distort, deny, or trivialize it. These places that are the containers of life and experience—the mother lode of societies and cultures—have always provided an amazing account of the human condition in all of its uncommon, unpredictable, and unexpected diversity. The built record, which holds most of the lessons of art and history, is there for anyone to see; but, increasingly, we have not wanted to see it. Or we have preferred to pretty it up, to reconfigure it for other purposes. Denial has spread like a virus, invading, infecting, and changing architectural and urban standards in the most basic sense.

The replacement of reality with selective fantasy is a phenomenon of that most successful and staggeringly profitable American phenomenon, the reinvention of the environment as themed entertainment. The definition of “place” as a chosen image probably started in a serious way in the late 1920s at Colonial Williamsburg, predating and paving the way for the new world order of Walt Disney Enterprises. Certainly it was in the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg that the studious fudging of facts received its scholarly imprimatur, and that history and place as themed artifact hit the big time. Williamsburg is seen by the cognoscenti as a kind of period piece now, its shortsightedness a product of the limitations of the early preservation movement. Within a conscientious range of those deliberately and artfully set limitations, a careful construct was created: a place where one could learn a little romanticized history, confuse the real and unreal, and have—then and now—a very nice time. Knowledge, techniques, and standards have become increasingly sophisticated in the intervening years, and there have been escalating efforts to keep up. But it is the Williamsburg image and example as originally conceived that has spread and multiplied, that continues to be universally admired and emulated.

Restoration is a difficult and unclear procedure at best; unreality is built into the process, which requires a highly subjective kind of cosmetic surgery that balances life and death. At Williamsburg, there was instant amputation with the conceit of a “cutoff date” for the restoration—in this case, 1770, an arbitrary determination of when, and for what purpose, a place should be frozen in time. After the cutoff date had been chosen, the next step for the undertaking has been to “restore it back”; both euphemisms are official preservationese. “Restoring back” means re-creating a place as someone thinks it was—or would like it to have been—at a certain chosen moment, eliminating everything else that was not there at the time. This usually means moving or destroying a good deal of subsequent architectural history—exactly the stuff of which real history and art are made. Fashions in preservation and appalling good taste are part of the mix. In an act of stunning illogic and innocent hubris, a consortium of preservation architects and historical soothsayers plays God, with assists from the spirits of Emily Post and Elsie de Wolfe.

As practiced in this country, these linguistic and conceptual crimes against art and history have achieved complete acceptance and respectability. They have become established elements of popular culture. They have also given a license to destroy. Approximately 730 buildings were removed at Williamsburg; 81 were renovated and 413 were rebuilt on the original sites.¹ Everything later than the chosen time frame had to disappear. So much for reality. And so much for the messy, instructive, invaluable, and irretrievable revelations that are part of the serendipitous record of urban settlements. In Williamsburg, prerestoration photographs showed a range of post-Colonial buildings of valid later styles. They were real, of course, but they were inappropriate to the cutoff date, and so they were bulldozed or removed. This becomes a slippery game. The next step replaces the “wrong” buildings with the “right” buildings, moved, in turn, from somewhere else. To complete the stage set, major buildings that no longer existed are reconstructed—at Williamsburg, the Capitol. That decision involved some Alice in Wonderland architectural hairsplitting about whether to reproduce the first or second version of the building, neither of which had been there for quite some time. (The second burned in 1832.) Much was made of the available documentary evidence, which, it has turned out, was fraught with interpretive booby traps; we know now that bitter debate accompanied questionable conclusions.

When it comes to furnishing and equipping these re-created settings, the dreams and ambitions of curators take over, and collections of awesome and improbable museum quality are assembled. Occasionally there is the coup of a piece of furniture or an object returned to its original home. Much that is only tenuously connected to what might have been is rationalized by the phrase “of the period.” Elegant and elaborate curtains and upholstery from fabric manufacturers known for historic reproductions inevitably follow, as day follows night, inspiring upscale decorator lines. Details of rebuilt or restored structures are copied from the more splendid examples, locally or abroad, or from pattern books—always “of the period.” At this point, reason disintegrates; carriages and costumes and all the appurtenances of make-believe take over—in the interest of an ersatz reality, of course, as well as of the tourist trade. (I am still bemused by a television series, purportedly on architecture, in which the postmodernist architects Leon Krier and Robert A. M. Stern, riding in one of those carriages, blithely praised the spurious and the silly at Williamsburg. This philosophical joyride led to their enthusiastic endorsement, once all rational standards were abandoned, of a vaguely Williamsburged suburban shopping center of depressingly bottomless banality as a really neat idea.)

The blend of new and old, real and fake, original and copy, even in the best of these restorations, defies separation or analysis; they are all, in the beginning and the end, an artificial invention that is supposed to tell us, truly, what our art and history were like. But at the same time that they supposedly teach something to those who might otherwise remain innocent of history, they devalue what they teach; the intrinsic qualities of the real are transformed and falsified by an experience that is itself the ultimate unreality.

In his brilliant and energetic pursuit of this curiously American phenomenon of glorifying the unreal over the real, Umberto Eco observes that for a reconstruction to be credible “it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a ‘real’ copy of the reality being presented.”² Writing with as insightful and revealing an eye on a people and their practices as de Tocqueville’s observations on democracy, he notes that “the American imagination demands the

1 MARCUS WHIFFEN, *The Public Buildings of Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1958), v.

2 UMBERTO ECO, *Travels in Hyper Reality*. William Weaver, trans. (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

real thing, and to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake...for historical information to be absorbed, it has to assume the aspect of a reincarnation...the 'completely real' becomes the 'completely fake'...absolute unreality is offered as real presence." It follows that the restoration must be more real, or better than real, superior to any natural survivor. And, of course, the housekeeping will be immensely better, making it all more acceptable and inviting.

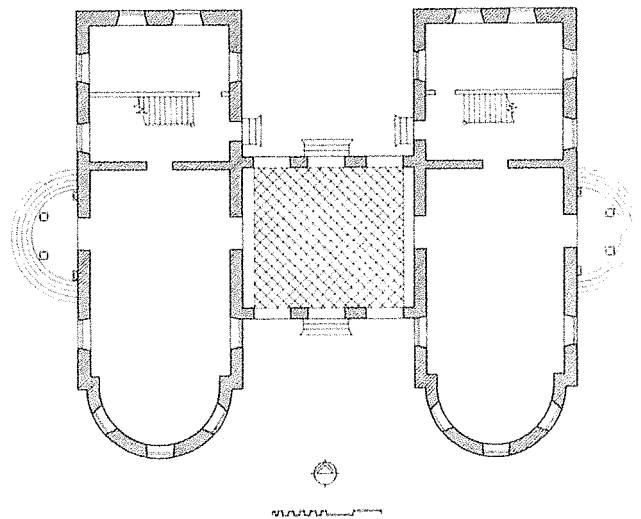
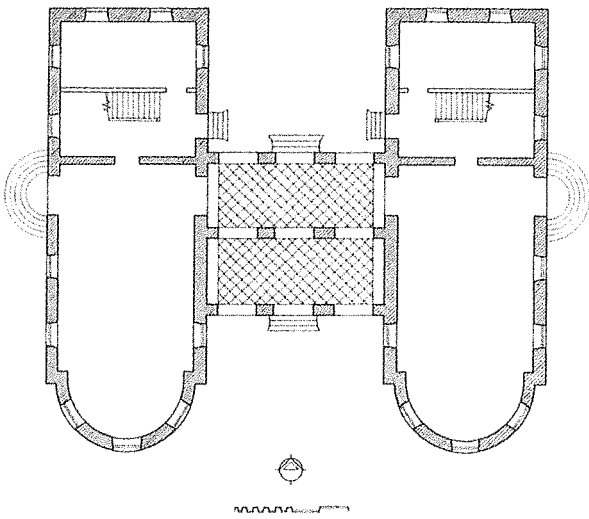
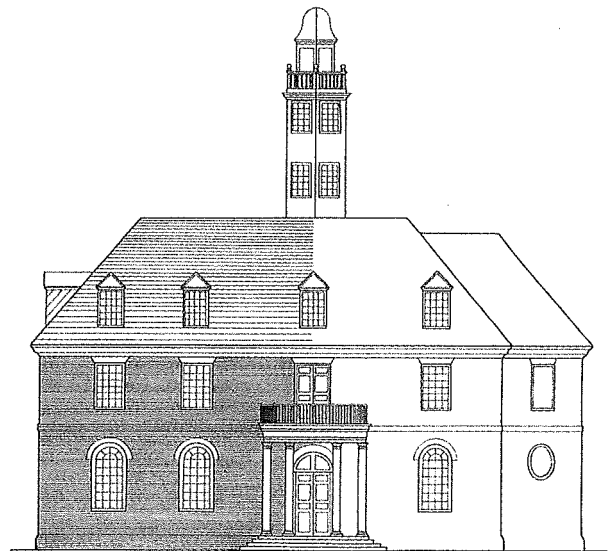
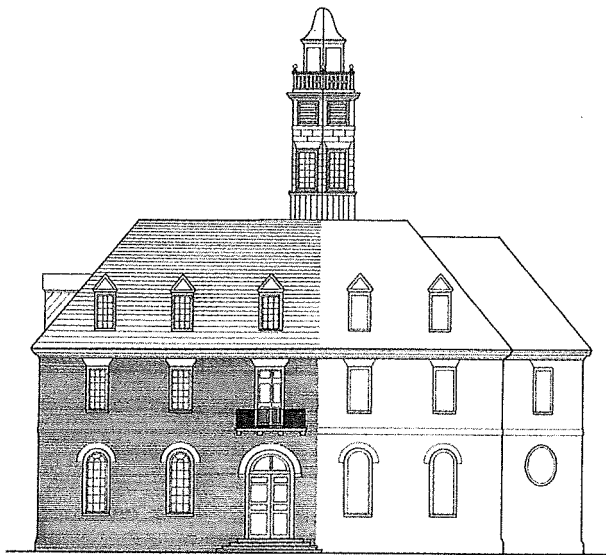
A visit to these places can be extremely pleasant if one suspends all discomfort about accuracy and mixed messages. The average tourist is routinely lulled into believing that this is the way it was—tidied up a little, naturally, with a bit of slippage in the story being told for a more attractive product, and with a few good restaurants added, preferably with local historical cuisine. The ladies in hoopskirts, who have exchanged their 1930s saddle shoes for Reeboks under their petticoats, tell you that this is so. Only someone as churlish as I, knowing and caring too much, could be consistently put off by the experience. At one point (I confess to being agent provocateur in my journalist role at the *New York Times*) there was some effort to indicate what had actually survived in situ at Williamsburg, if not exactly what had been done to it, and to identify what were increasingly called "authentic reproductions," a term that has filled an unreal need where none existed before.

My loathing of the term "authentic reproduction" goes deep; these are the con words of American culture. The use and influence of the phrase are universal, cutting across almost all cultural levels. I cannot think of a more mischievous, dangerous, anomalous, and shoddy perversion of language and meaning. A perfect contradiction in terms, it makes no sense at all; but what particularly offends is its smug falseness, its dissembling, genteel pretentiousness. Authentic is the real thing, and a reproduction, by definition, is not; a copy is still a copy, no matter how skilled or earnest its intentions. To equate a replica with the genuine artifact is the height of sophistry; it cheapens and renders meaningless its true age and provenance. To imply equal value is to deny the act of creation within its own time frame, to cancel out the generative forces of its cultural context. What is missing is the original mind, hand, material, and eye. The kindest thing you can say is that an authentic reproduction is a genuine oxymoron.

"Authentic reproduction" has entered the language as a total up-ending of values and a great moneymaker for historic restorations,

museums, and assorted coattail enterprises. What interests me is how far this easy confusion of fact and fantasy has come, and how insidiously it has corrupted the way we think. Whether or not we relegate the premises of Williamsburg to the mists of preservation time, its popularity and progeny have taught us to subvert reality on a grand scale, to prefer—and believe in—the sanitized and selective version of the past. This has led to the denial of the diversity and eloquence of change and continuity, and to the devaluation of those deposits of history and humanity that make our cities vehicles of a special kind of art and experience without parallel or peer. Of course, we like our memories better all cleaned up. The gritty and sometimes unlovely accumulations that characterize cities are the best and worst of what we have produced; they exert a fascination that no neatly edited version can inspire. I have enormous respect and affection for this record; it never ceases to reward and intrigue me. I have never stopped learning from it or marveling at its surprises. From the magnificence representing the highest human aspirations to the decayed dreams of serious social failure, it has the wonder and distinction and example of being the real thing. I have spent much time exploring those imperfect, glorious to grungy accumulations of urban experience, with the unexpected revelations of value and meaning so richly embedded in everything from high art to the art of the commonplace. The variety of ordinary styles and patterns in a few city blocks offers more information and pleasure than the sterile clichés of any artificial substitute. To edit life, to sanitize the substance of history, is to risk losing the art, actuality, and meaning of the real past and its intrinsic artifacts.

These preservation “enclaves” are frequently an assortment of developer-dispossessed fragments given a new “olde” name after having been moved from places where they were inconveniently interfering with profitable new construction. When reality does occasionally rear its ambiguous head in the curious collection of castoffs, the whole business collapses. Although some historians have always suspected that Williamsburg might be too good to be true, serious revisionism is relatively recent. A second, more “scientific” look at the evidence has resulted in a drastic revision of the long-revered “correct” paint colors, from discreetly muted and infinitely salable Williamsburg blues and greens to much gaudier hues. In the further interest of “authenticity,” management introduced some pigs to roam the too tidy streets, although their role has been changed from scavengers of garbage to pictureque props. (The addition of livestock in these so-called authentic restorations has



The Capitol at Colonial Williamsburg, reconstructed in 1932-33 by using foundation remains and pictorial references, elevation and plan, *right*, is a building of classical symmetry. Fifty years later, a new study of the same sources by Carl R. Lounsbury indicated a corrected interpretation with an off-center facade and layout, elevation and plan, *left*. Drawings courtesy of Carl R. Lounsbury and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

brought along another anomaly — “breeding back” for more “authentic” animals.) These things snowball into a kind of circular lunacy. Historians are aware of the dilemma, and there is a lot of scholarly soul-searching going on in Williamsburg and other places about how to increase the authenticity of the imitation. Younger historians have even committed the heresy of claiming that the Williamsburg Capitol is not that authentic at all.

The rebuilders of the reconstructed Capitol have now been accused of redesigning it. It takes just about a half century for the cycles of taste and style to turn, for one revelation to be replaced by another. More recent scholarship³ has suggested that the original documents and foundation remains were misread in the 1930s. Taught to think in terms of the formal classical symmetry of their Beaux Arts training, the reconstruction architects could not believe, or accept, that the building’s axis could have been off-center. The entrance contradicts the evidence of the foundation and is probably in the wrong place. Other spatial relationships are also questionable.

Beyond virtually unavoidable technical errors, authentic reproductions will always be false. Few historical documents are immune to interpretation. Such undertakings are processed through the eyes and minds of subsequent generations. Still, this kind of reconstruction has taken on an aura of natural, or national, correctness. Foreign dignitaries are welcomed at Williamsburg by the State Department and provided with photo ops in carriages. Because the best documents and the most astute detective work are rarely definitive, new directors and attitudes and the passage of time lead to “revisions,” each touted as more authentic than the last. In fact, the differing interpretive visions and their mutations are as interesting for what they teach us about changing tastes and viewpoints as for their exposure of the limited, wishful, and often demonstrably false first readings of the experts. To track the life of a restoration is to learn a great deal about art, history, and reality.

Then what are we to do about the past? Sacrifice it to the conventional wisdom of amiable evasion and commercial viability? Bow to the inevitability of destruction and loss? Continue to exploit and distort it, turning it into a crude caricature and crowd-pleaser while

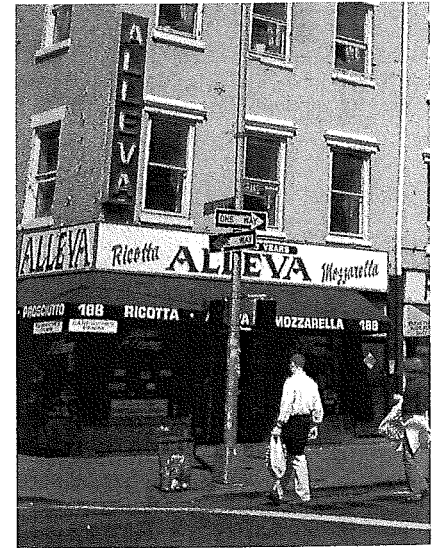
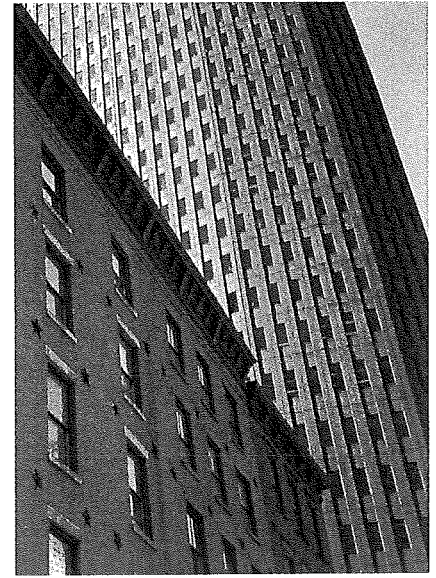
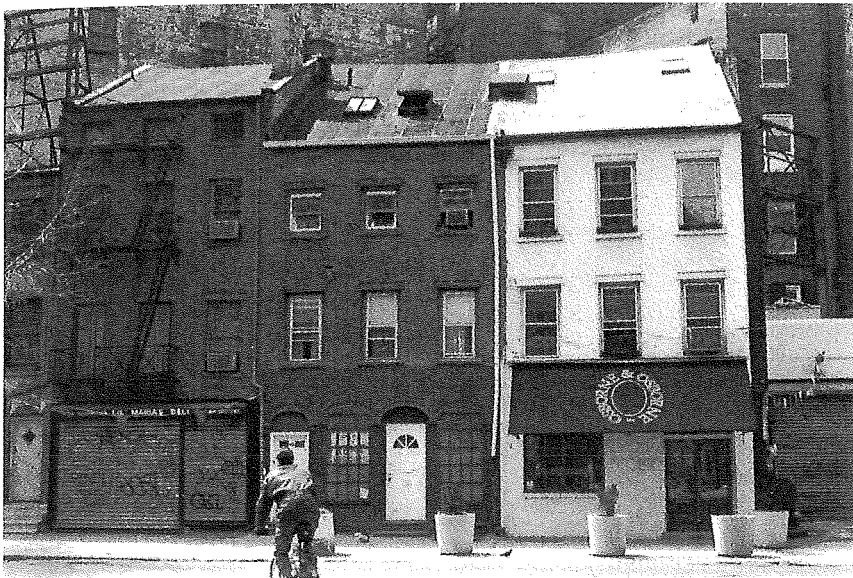
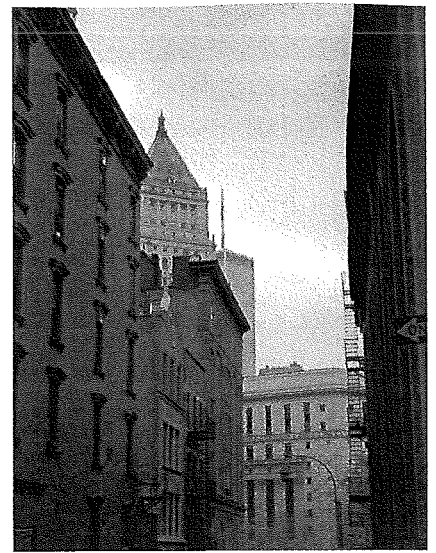
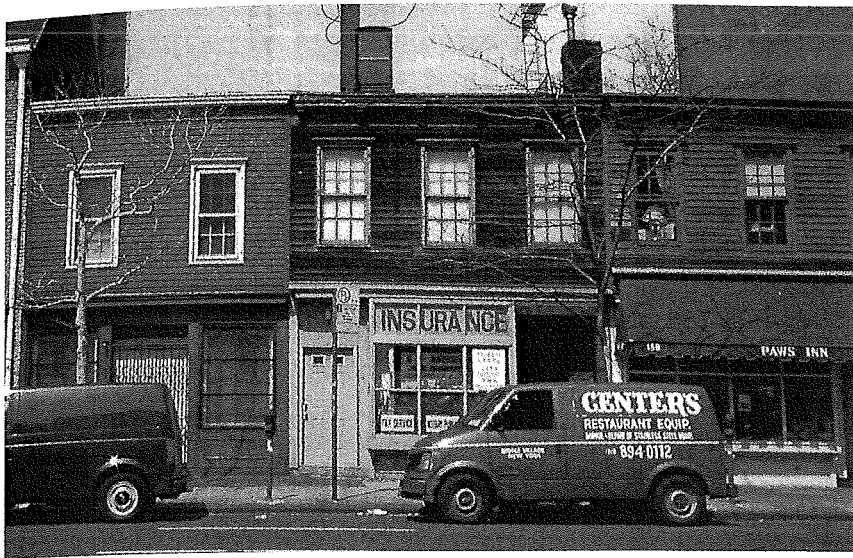
3 CARL R. LOUNSBURY, “Beaux-Arts Ideals and Colonial Reality: The Reconstruction of Williamsburg’s Capitol, 1928-1934” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, December 1990, 373-389.

pointing piously to what we have “saved?” Obviously, we will continue to follow that course because we do it so well. More glossy coffee-table books will display glorious, full-color, oversize photographs of our “successes.” This face-saving, artifact-saving formula has become enormously popular and profitable, whatever its fictions or manipulative distortions. These historic restorations and re-creations are, however, becoming increasingly expensive to maintain, with growing fund-raising problems. And some of us will be increasingly conflicted about the results.

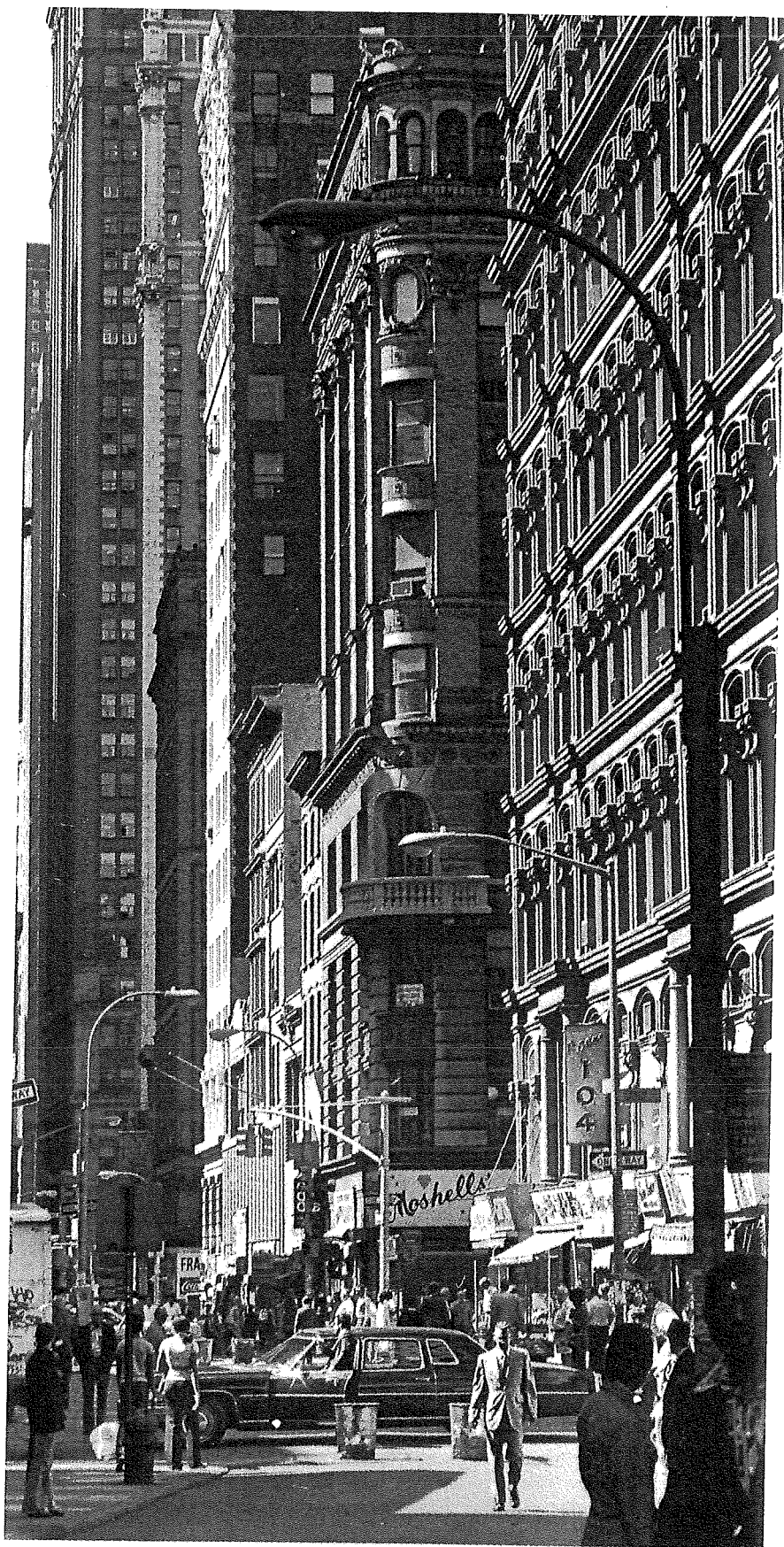
In fact, we have learned a great deal since the Williamsburg model. We understand much more about the past and its complex relationships with the present. At best, preservation is a necessary but ambiguous effort; there is nothing tidy about it. We know that preservation is a complex and subtle component of larger urban and environmental issues. We have come to understand the past as both place and process, to see the architectural aesthetic in its social and cultural context. The movement has come a long way, from the primitive nostalgia of “George Washington slept here” to the sophisticated creation of historic districts as part of municipal policy and law. But its most popular and successful by-product is the high-class historical theme park and its more commercial clones.

Fortunately, there has also been increasing recognition of those surviving modest streets and buildings, spontaneous accretions of character and history, that capture and keep the past as part of the present. Their surprising stylistic range has made them difficult to declare as protected districts, and even more difficult to deal with. These anonymous urban survivals are essentially unmanageable in academic or aesthetic terms, since individual buildings may lack “landmark” status or a scholarly seal of approval; they do not fit into the established “great building” or “historic house” mold. They have tended to fall like dominoes under developer attack and in courts of law, until cumulative preservation decisions strengthened their legal claims. Unfortunately, the idea of the isolated landmark divorced from its setting is surprisingly tenacious. It underlies the criteria of some early preservation statutes, which were often based on the dramatic rescue of a single threatened structure; it is a standard that still tends to be most persuasive with preservation boards and commissions. At best, these areas present a Hobson’s choice: unrestrained interventions shatter their fragile fabric; restrictive regulations take the life out of them. In either case, a definitive and inevitable transformation results.

Rows of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings, accidental survivors of relentless rebuilding in Lower Manhattan, keep the past as part of the present by adapting continuously and unself-consciously to new needs. *Photos, Joel Honig and A. L. Huxtable.*



The natural accretions of time and taste add up to the lively diversity of New York's Nassau Street.



The designation of such areas as landmark districts starts a process of homogenization, an economic, cultural, and physical upgrading in which everything is made to resemble what it might have once been—only better. The act of preservation turns what has been “saved” into something else, at the same time that the improvements provide the economic base that “saves” it. This is classic Catch-22. Sooner or later, image and function are defined and fixed in an artificial formula that combines sentiment, fashion, and tourist appeal. Still, it is hard to be ungrateful when the alternative is destruction or degenerative decay of the historic heart of the city. The dilemma has no easy answers; it allows no glib judgments. In a perceptive essay, the Swiss urban historian André Corboz has posed the essential and inescapable question: will there be nothing in the historic centers of America or Europe, he asks, between “a tourism that denatures them and a squalor that degrades them?”⁴

I am not arguing for an end to preservation; I have fought too long and too hard for heritage consciousness and preservation legislation, for stylistic survival, for the recognition of the beauty and necessity of older and undervalued buildings. The cherishing of the aesthetic and urban achievements of the past is critical to the quality of our environment and our lives. To lose history is to lose place, identity, and meaning. But continuity can be achieved only if the past is integrated into the contemporary context in a way that works and matters. Our awareness and appreciation of historic buildings and neighborhoods must be coupled with a sensitivity to and desire for their continued relevance and use, for their “connectedness,” for the way they bridge the years and the continuum of social, cultural, urban, and architectural history. It is their recycling and adaptation that will keep them as a living part of today’s cities and communities. Their uses may be unconventional; they may even become marginal; they may offer a casual palimpsest rather than textbook history; they will certainly be impure rather than pure—if there is really anything admirable about that kind of pedantic reduction to irrelevance.

Is it possible to suggest the unthinkable: that “historic preservation,” like “authentic reproduction,” is often an illusory reality, a contradiction in terms, that its success contains the paradox of

4 ANDRÉ CORBOZ, *Looking for a City in America: Down These Mean Streets a Man Must Go...* Angel’s Flight, Occasional Papers from Los Angeles. (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1992) First published as “Non-City Revisited” in *La Ville Inquiète*. (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1987). p. 57

failure? Unlike the complete sham of “authentic reproduction,” the idea of historic preservation starts with authentic material; the process changes authenticity into artificiality. If authentic reproduction is a conceptual and linguistic fallacy, historic preservation is more properly a semantic trap. Its definitions and desires are set by the seductions of what survives—those rare, real, evanescent, and evocative pieces of the past that are ultimately betrayed or excised by the unreality of the restoration.

To express profound unease or to pose this question—when so many dedicated professionals struggle with the enormous task of dealing with complex regulations, uncertain finances, and growing commercial competition while they try to keep what they know should not be lost—is to be considered remote and unsympathetic. One is perceived as an enemy of the cause. I do not deny the need for the past, or the legitimacy and necessity of the movement that carries the preservation name, or the tragedy of the lost past when the destruction is brutal and willful. But I believe we can no longer evade the reality of what we have achieved by expedient distortion or deliberate simulacrum, in forms to suit transient tastes and economic imperatives. In fact, to raise these issues at all, one must love the past very much.

History is quicksilver that runs at the touch; it refers to events that derived their life, breath, color, and meaning from some elusive shaping moment in the irretrievable past. It is both charged and changed by the prism of passing time. The essential, defining clues of a particular moment may not even survive. By its very definition, history is something that is gone forever. Do the passage of time and the irreversible effects of that inexorable process, seen through our shifting, conditioned responses, make preservation an erudite, often misleading game, with artificially embalmed remains and suspiciously elegant artifacts? Does it not follow that inventions and simulacra, of things that existed and things that did not, will be given equal value and credibility? Is it tempting to value them more than the shabby, incomplete survivals? Must one always exorcise the ghosts for costumed extras?

The questions are rhetorical; this has, in fact, already happened. We acknowledge our need for the signs and signifiers of time and place by reference and association, but we insist that those signs and signifiers are replicable. Both Eco and Jean Baudrillard have pointed out that the copy is not only preferred, it is now taken as

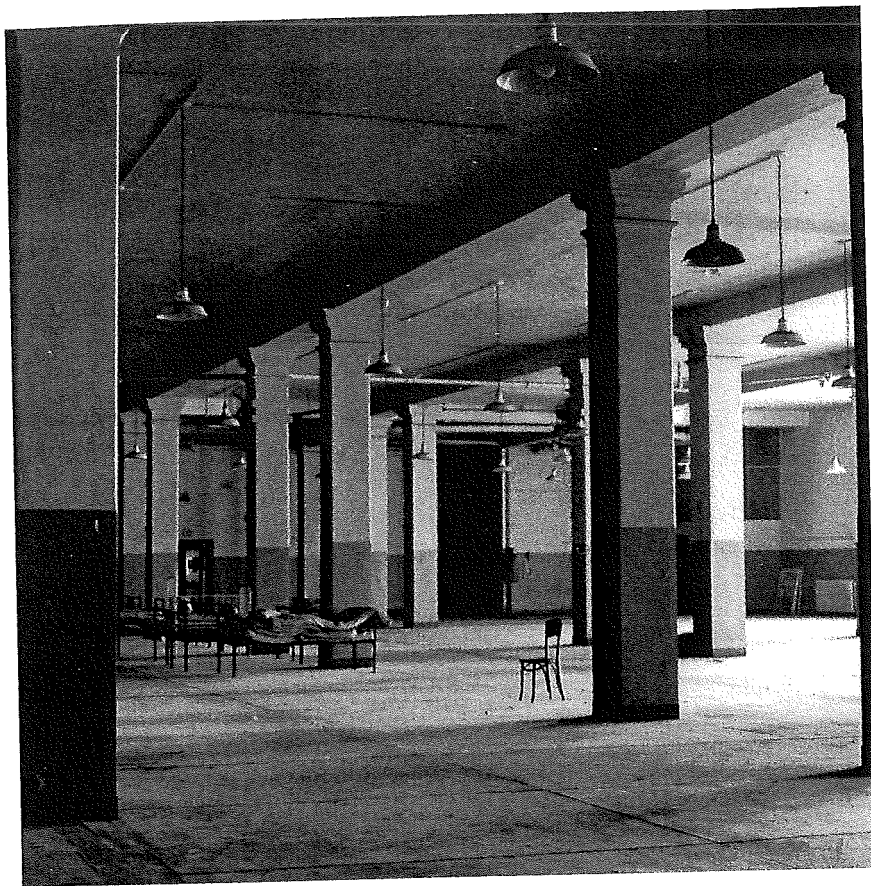
the thing itself. The past must have immediate, corporeal presence. "Our entire linear and accumulative culture would collapse if we could not stockpile the past in plain view," Baudrillard has observed.⁵ In this reading, the improved re-creation is valued over the flawed original or shabby survival; it is considered more iconic, representative, ideal, and congenial. For most, it has become the reality.

What the perfect fake or impeccable restoration lacks are the hallmarks of time and place. They deny imperfections, alterations, and accommodations; they wipe out all the incidents of life and change. The worn stone, the chafed corner, the threshold low and uneven from many feet, the marks on walls and windows that carry the presence and message of remembered hands and eyes—all of those accumulated, accidental, suggestive, and genuine imprints that imbue the artifact with its history and continuity, that have stayed with it in its conditioning passage through time—are absent or erased. There is nothing left of the journey from there to here, nothing that palpably joins the past to the present, that makes direct physical and emotional contact with the viewer, the bitter-sweet link with those who have been there before. What are gone are the cumulative clues, the patina of age and use, the sense of "others"—that essential, irreplaceable quality that Stephen Greenblatt has so insightfully called "resonance."⁶ It is this resonance that gives an object "the power...to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to invoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged." Significantly, it is precisely this central, intrinsic quality that has been eliminated from the reproduction, that no longer exists in the restoration. These objects and places simply do not resonate. They are mute. They are hollow history.

The more conscientious or careful the restoration, the larger the doubts and discomforts likely to be raised. In awarding a prize to the restoration of Ellis Island, a jury coupled praise with troubling questions: "Does this building in its polished and gleaming freshness correctly convey the sense of history this hallowed place should engender?" the citation asked. Answering the pointed

5 JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *Simulations*. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman, trans. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 19.

6 STEPHEN GREENBLATT, "Resonance and Wonder," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (January 1990): 11-34.



Abandoned chairs in Ellis Island's empty and decaying rooms could speak of transition and displacement with more eloquence than artful museum arrangement of specimen baggage and computer-generated information displays in the same space today. In the completed restoration, all the ghosts are gone. *Prerestoration 1954 photographs by Shirley Burden, courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York. Restored baggage room courtesy of the architects, Beyer Blinder Belle.*





query with what can only be called a sincere waffle, the text concluded that “although the very newness of the result may seem at odds with the project’s commitment to history, it is so skillfully executed and thoughtfully conceived, that [it] deserves the highest commendation.”⁷ A not inconsiderable factor was that the historic gateway for America’s immigrants in New York’s harbor had been saved for future generations. Still, A for effort begs serious misgivings. A skilled and scrupulous conversion to a memorial and museum has exorcised all ghosts. Memories have been edited. The shabby, littered halls and abandoned, scattered chairs that still retain the presence of those who came and went, who waited to be processed, received, or rejected, the transience, crowding and anxiety, the sense of endings and beginnings, the untidiness and uncertainties of the historical process, have been reduced to an artfully arranged display of old luggage. What it was like exists only in a remarkable set of original 1954 photographs by Shirley Burden, filled with resonance and wonder.

Today’s Ellis Island has a completely different style. Tasteful replacement parts and neat modern details, cliché commercial displays of informative push-and-light-up exhibits, handsomely restored Guastavino vaulting in the great hall that seems more attuned to catering than to a cacophony of languages—everything has an earnest educational air and a careful “good design” gloss. Even the much visited wall of names is too precisely metallic, too unimpressive and impersonal in material and scale, underwhelming in its lack of monumentality, grandeur, and suggestion. This is a tidy, mechanical roll call. The place is—simply—something else.

As a privileged visitor allowed to wander through unrestored buildings on the island, I was able to find its poignant identity again. The hospital of endless corridors,⁸ lined with miles of broken, continuous window sash and an occasional abandoned bed, was a revolutionary, light-filled building where those with infectious diseases were quarantined. Shadows filtered through trees into the many open courtyards of the remarkable plan where tubercular patients were wheeled for sun and air. The morgue of this early teaching hospital, with its concrete slab and small

7 ALBERT S. BARD AWARD, presented in 1992 by the City Club of New York to outstanding works of architecture and urban design.

8 The hospital is now on the World Monuments Fund list of most endangered buildings for its design and medical innovations.

amphitheater of rising seats above it, summons up a *terribilità* of human pathos and scientific mission. Pigeons fly through corner towers open to the sky, the rubble of roofs and layers of leaves crumbling on the stairs underfoot. Abandonment has its own meaning and message, a direct contact with what once was that disappears with restoration—one of those anomalies with no answer. In the restored main hall, what you see is what you get—and what you get is not what it was.

No one wants to face the possibility that salvation self-destructs when the alternative is loss or ruin; the trade-off is too painfully clear to contemplate. Inevitably, there are some extraordinary mixed signals and some very unsettling messages being sent, as well as a notable reluctance to receive them. A genuine concern for the past does not prevent intellectual, historical, and artistic distortions from taking place. There are stunning ambiguities involved, a familiar state in so many aspects of art and life today. Doubt, double meaning, and ironic side effects have become a kind of leading cultural indicator of our time.

What we find is that we have invented a new past according to a set of criteria designed to satisfy our own current needs and standards. This has always been so, of course; revisionism is part of the historical process. In today's fractured and deeply troubled society the need is for something that comforts, reassures, and entertains—a world where harsh truths can be suspended or forgotten for a benign and soothing, preferably distracting, substitute. The nostalgic simplifications of feel-good, participatory, romanticized history are the popular and profitable answer. To reinforce the myth of more rigorous "interpretation" and accuracy, we use increasingly sophisticated tools of invention and support: the "scientific" research of chemistry, the computer, skilled domestic archaeology, the discipline and discoveries of materials culture. The familiar, formulaic procedure defines the brand of preservation that has become a staple of today's tourism, and it is not incidental that tourism is an increasingly important part of local economies, often the main support of small historic towns that have lost their business base to suburban malls.

Finally, the environmental end-product and the economic bottom line are the same. The unsurprisingly similar "historic whatever"—of varying degrees of convenient invention and scholarly reliability, on a well-defined tourist track, market-driven, supported by

market research—is a predictable product and a business that have their own rules and circular irony. If something is to be saved, the costs must be paid; if the costs are to be paid, the money must be available; to get the money, the product must sell; to sell, it must appeal; which brings it right back to the market again. The struggle for funds cannot stop. So market-minded, in fact, do some of the most dedicated preservation groups become, through actual need or carefully solicited business advice (or both), that as recently as the early go-go 1980s Colonial Williamsburg was considering the demolition of a neighborhood of perfectly good early-twentieth-century houses, judged expendable under the self-imposed rules of eighteenth-century reference and relevance, for an investment development of town houses of tenuous traditional recall. The idea was protested and dropped, one suspects as much for a weak real estate market as for objections of principle. But preservation, development, and real estate have become a very comfortable ménage à trois, conspicuously in bed together. The savers and the spoilers have joined to give us a conceptual and aesthetic product that ranges from confusion to corruption, characteristic of no other place or time.

The easiest way is to stay with the popular idea of historic preservation as an entertainment and educational package of at least marginal commercial viability. That keeps the problem out of the developers' way and hair. Admittedly, to do anything else is to go a more difficult route. Such efforts are usually due to stubbornly dedicated private leadership working against the grain, with a sympathetic public or private preservation body to overcome infinite procedural obstacles. Unfortunately, the more familiar model carries a near-universal stamp of approval, even as it offers all the wrong lessons and considerable disinformation. The harm it does is to confirm for many that this is the only way to go, that a heritage is being saved by cordoning off, sanitizing, and redefining an artificial piece of the past. Neatness counts.

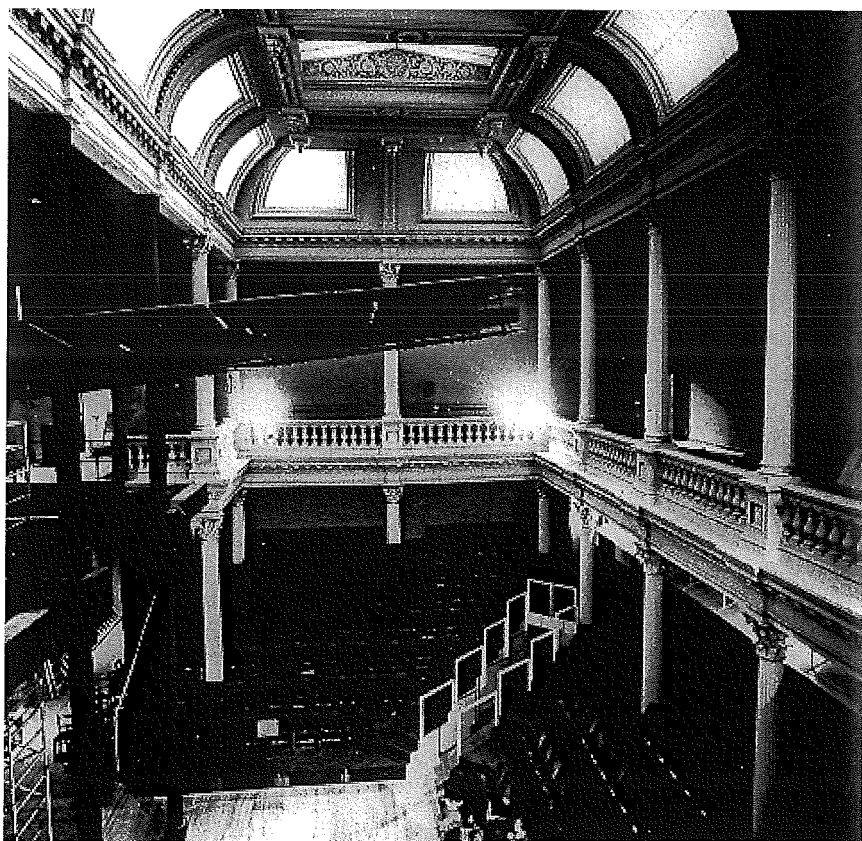
Because this cop-out is so widely accepted, the real losses are neither acknowledged nor understood, nor ultimately dealt with. Even among those equipped to judge, there is an inability or unwillingness to understand that a battle can be won and lost at the same time. It is hard to be clear-eyed about what these Pyrrhic victories do to the subject under siege; there is an understandable reluctance to face the problem when no easy answers exist. Nor is it the American way to define a dilemma without providing a solution.

By now, of course, vested interests are served through entrenched belief or financial involvement. But I see no reason for righteous rationalization or circuitous justification of the results; there is no real defense for the kind of transformation of the past that is increasingly approaching what Baudrillard has called, in another context, "extermination by museumification."⁹

There are answers, but they require profound changes in philosophy and support. The problems of site-and-use preservation are enormous but not insurmountable. They must be understood in terms of immediate benefit and long-term gain and treated as appropriate public and national priorities. Unfortunately, that kind of preservation has no connection with public policy, which determines both public and private action and expenditure. Public policy in this country, particularly in Republican administrations, is to see expenditures for preservation as in a league with original sin. Other countries treat the national heritage as a national responsibility. The beauty of Paris is no accident; the protection and maintenance of its urban and architectural heritage are a state-funded policy and priority. In the United States, the public sector has no funds for urban investment, least of all for anything that involves appropriate planning and design. Private investment defines quality of life as some up-front luxury trim and a few recreational amenities thrown in by the developer. Public policy militates against anything better; private interests recognize only exploitative and potentially profitable flourishes. When tax credits that encourage reuse of old buildings are proved to work, to the benefit of both people and cities, they are compromised or repealed, while perennially generous real estate incentives are promoted that favor destruction and, often, shoddy new construction. When a rare program of vision is passed, developers usually find ingenious ways to profitably subvert the objectives, while government builds leaden bureaucracies that do the same thing.

Just after World War II, the Italians demonstrated an extraordinary sensibility to the problems and solutions of rebuilding in a historic context. Modern interventions were skillfully and elegantly inserted into historic cities without copying or second-guessing the past; Italian architects designed and carried out their work in a way that beautifully defined their own creative moment through tacit differences between old and new in style and use, while establishing

Historic architecture enhances new uses in Boston's Old City Hall, *top*, remodeled for offices and restaurants, and New York's Astor Library, bottom, now in its third incarnation as the New York Shakespeare Festival and Public Theater, after it had been abandoned by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.



a rich and explicit continuity of urban history and form. This method, marvelously successful in older European cities, was subsequently grossly misunderstood and misapplied, particularly in the United States and Great Britain, where incongruity passed as comity at the height of the modern movement. Maybe what was lacking in those brutal or banal juxtapositions was the history-steeped, fine Italian eye and hand. With few exceptions, most architects preferred to demolish anything old for anything new.

Today, an inevitable backlash against modernism's aggressive anti-historicism has rejected this approach for an emphasis on "period" infill of "matching" styles, a safe and sterile response that begs many questions about art and history and genuine contextualism. "The profession of urban design is almost wholly preoccupied with reproduction, with the creation of urbane disguises," writes the critic Michael Sorkin.¹⁰ There may be times and places where this method is the appropriate course, but the circumstances are special and few. The most notorious example of this blinkered vision is probably the area around St. Paul's in London, a precinct so atrociously reconstructed after World War II in a flabby modernism of total architectural and urban vacuity and irrelevance that an unavoidable backlash—aided by the ever vigilant Prince Charles—has foreclosed any rebuilding possibilities except as a pastiche of the past. In Washington, D.C., the art of historical camouflage is being given a special twist: the nation's capital is being Disneyfied with whole streets of carefully amputated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century facades, cunningly retained and prettily restored as literal false fronts for outsize new buildings erected directly behind them. These "preserved" streetscapes look as if they have been wheeled in, like stage flats; one half expects appropriately costumed performers to jump out and sing. Or at least walk around, shake hands, and pose for pictures with the tourists, à la Mickey and Goofy. Surely a dubious-achievement award should go to this insane compromise that succeeds in making fakes out of something real.

My objective in this long critique is not to prove anything right or wrong, good or bad; we are a country much too fond of analyses and solutions in black and white. I am dedicated to the continuity of that vulnerable heritage that defines us and adds immeasurably to our quality of life. To make that possible, we need honest evalua-

¹⁰ Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), xiv.

tions of what matters and why; such anonymous, hard-to-label survivals fail to pass outmoded definitions or fit rigidly preestablished criteria. We need to recognize and admit that the preservation movement has had both resounding successes and mixed and dubious results, that we need a reevaluation of objectives and methods on both the public and private fronts. I might even dare to hope for some recognition of the advantages of ambiguity and its rewarding dual readings of past and present, even to suggest that we might find ways to incorporate that rich palimpsest of experience and aesthetics into the contemporary urban and human condition. This cannot happen while we insist that, intellectually and morally, the distinctions be kept clear between one thing and another, past and present, old and new, with the help of some scholarly or popular fudging; we prefer hypocrisy to loose ends.

I am devoted to the principle that every age produces its greatest buildings in its own image. I believe that the art and act of contemporary design must be rooted in, and cannot avoid, the conditions and references of its own time. Ultimately, it is the addition and absorption of this continuous record of changing art, technology, ideas, and uses that make cities unique repositories of the whole range of human endeavor. Within this understanding and context, there is a preservation principle that can, and should, apply. There are viable criteria: the manner in which the historical setting accommodates change, the degree to which style and identity support authentic functions, and the frequency with which destruction is avoided by legitimate continuity through an appropriate role in contemporary life and use. All this determines whether, and how, and in what manner, we keep our heritage—and the meaning and worth and success of the effort. The past lives only as part of the present. The results will never be perfect, but they will be real.

The Unreal America

Architecture and Illusion

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE



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